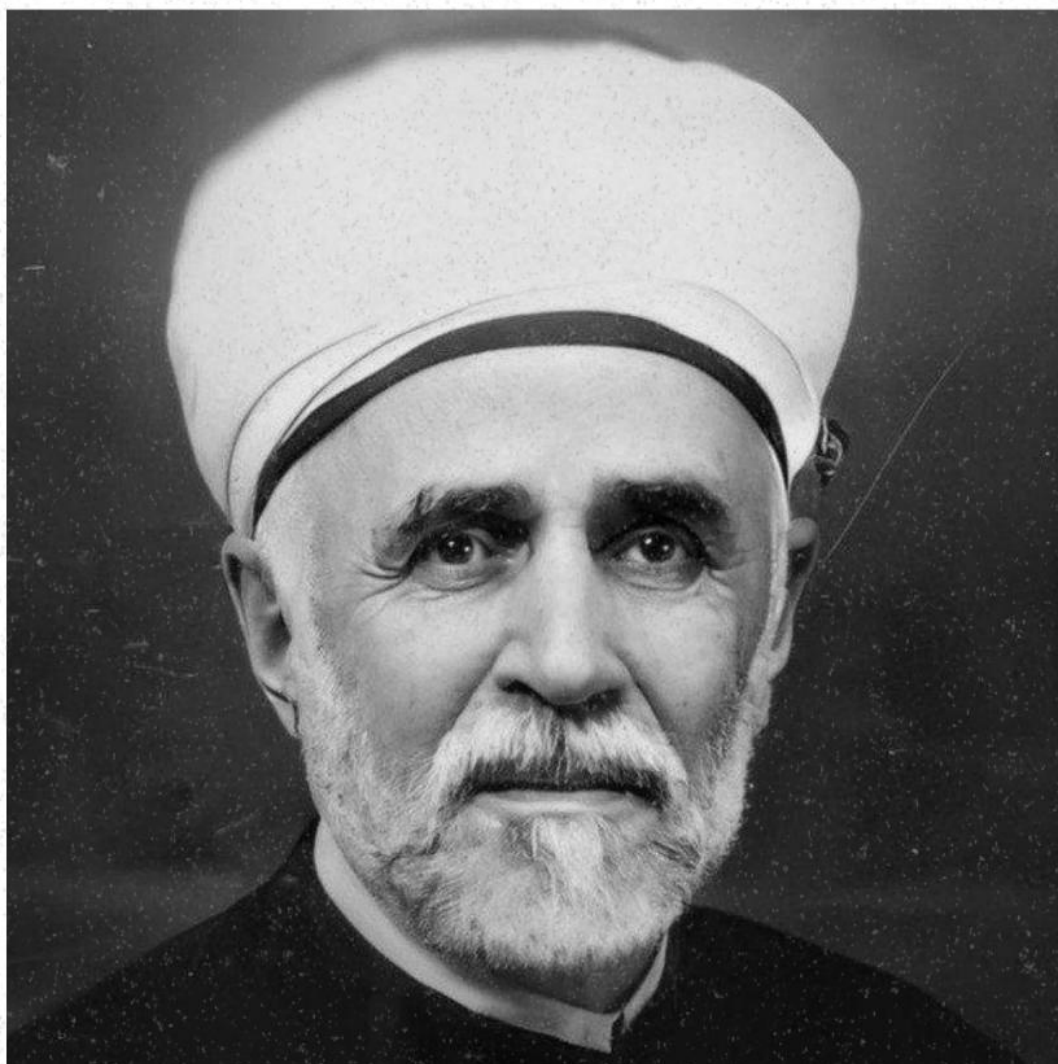


BIOGRAPHY OF IMĀM AL-KAWTHARĪ

BY THE ESTEEMED SHAYKH MUḤAMMAD ABŪ ZAHRA

TRANSLATED BY PRAY FOR THE MUSLIMS



Over a year ago, Islām lost an Imām among its scholars, one who rose above the trivialities of this worldly life and dedicated himself to knowledge with the sincerity of a believer worshipping his Lord. He understood that knowledge is a form of worship, sought solely for the pleasure of ALLĀH, and not for the sake of worldly status, corruption, or the pursuit of power. His aim was to uphold the truth in order to please the Almighty, Exalted be He. This was Imām al-Kawtharī, may ALLĀH have mercy upon him, and may He be pleased with him.

I do not recall a scholar whose absence has left such a void in recent years as that of Imām al-Kawtharī. He was a remnant of the righteous predecessors, who did not seek to exploit their knowledge for personal gain or as a means to an end. For them, knowledge was the ultimate goal and the highest aspiration. There is no greater aim for a believer than the pursuit of religious knowledge, nor any summit that a scholar can aspire to beyond it.

He was, may ALLĀH be pleased with him, a scholar who embodied the saying: “*The scholars are the heirs of the prophets.*” However, he did not view this inheritance merely as a mark of honour to boast about or to elevate himself above others. Instead, he regarded this inheritance as a form of *jihad*—the struggle in proclaiming Islām, clarifying its truths, and dispelling the misconceptions that cloud its essence. He presented the faith to people in a pure, radiant, and enlightening manner, guiding them towards his light and leading them to the right path.

This inheritance demanded that a scholar strive as the Prophets did, enduring hardships and trials as they did, and facing opposition from those whom they called to the truth and guidance, just as the Prophets, peace and blessings be upon them, faced. Such an inheritance is only a true

honour for those who earnestly pursue it, uphold its rights, and understand their obligations within it, and so it was with Imām al-Kawtharī, may ALLĀH be pleased with him.

The esteemed Imām was neither an advocate of a new doctrine nor a proponent of an unestablished matter. He was not among those whom people today label as reformers; in fact, he distanced himself from them. He was a follower, not an innovator. However, I assert that he was a true reviver in the genuine sense of the term. Reviver is not merely what people today understand as breaking away from tradition and rejecting the original Prophetic message. Rather, reviving involves restoring the beauty of the religion, removing the misconceptions that have attached to it, and presenting it to people in its purest form, as clear as its essence and as pristine as its origin.

It is indeed a form of revival to revive the Sunnah and to eradicate innovation, establishing the pillars of faith among the people. This is the true form of revival, both—authentic and sincerely. Imām al-Kawtharī played a significant role in reviving the Sunnah, uncovering what was hidden within the annals of history through its texts and the methodologies of its narrators. He communicated to the people through his writings and published works, which included the sayings, actions, and approvals of the Prophet Muḥammad, peace and blessings be upon him. He dedicated himself to the efforts of previous scholars who upheld the Sunnah and took great care in preserving it, publishing their works that documented their contributions to reviving the Sunnah and the religion. Their love for this cause resonated deeply within souls, while their hearts remained untainted by corruption, and they were not distracted by worldly affairs from the Hereafter, nor did they seek the company of kings.

Imām al-Kawtharī was indeed a true scholar, recognised by other scholars for his knowledge, though few truly appreciated his efforts. I became acquainted with him years before I met him, through his writings that radiated the light of truth, and through his annotations on manuscripts that he worked to disseminate. My admiration for the manuscripts was not as profound as my appreciation for his commentaries on them. Sometimes, a manuscript would be a brief message, yet Imām al-Kawtharī's annotations transformed it into a comprehensive book. His thorough understanding, vast knowledge, and expansive perspective were evident in his commentary, all accompanied by eloquent expression, subtle hints, strong critique, and precise targeting of ideas. It would never cross the reader's mind that he was a non-Arab writer; he was, indeed, a master of the Arabic language. Out of his profound humility, he did not include his official title from his work under the Ottoman rule alongside the title of the book, for he did not view, may ALLĀH be pleased with him, that a scholar's honour derives from his position.

The esteemed Imām did not seek official recognition for his scholarly work; instead, he believed that a scholar's honour comes from his academic contributions. Some readers, captivated by the clarity of his expression, the precision of his meanings, and the eloquence of his style, would not suspect that the author was Turkish. They would assume he was an Arab, born and raised in an Arab environment. Yet, it is no surprise that he was Turkish by lineage, upbringing, and life in Istanbul. However, his scholarly life was purely Arab, as he read only Arabic and was illuminated solely by the light of Arabic knowledge rooted in the teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad, peace and blessings be upon him. Therefore, he wrote in a neat style, free from foreign influences in Arabic discourse, choosing expressions that were universally accepted for their eloquence, reflecting

his extensive study of the Arabic language in terms of grammar and rhetoric. Furthermore, he composed beautiful Arabic poetry.

Imām al-Kawtharī, may ALLĀH be pleased with him, possessed qualities that elevated him and made him a role model for the Muslim scholars. He elevated knowledge above the marketplace, teaching that a Muslim scholar's homeland is the land of Islām. He would not accept humiliation in his faith, nor would he take from those who demean Islām. He did not allow anyone other than ALLĀH and the truth to dictate his will. He believed it was unacceptable to live in a land where one could not proclaim the truth or elevate the word of Islām, even if it was the country of his birth, where he grew up. A scholar lives by the spirit, not by materialism, and by eternal truths, not by fleeting pleasures. His worth lies in being esteemed by ALLĀH and in the Hereafter, while worldly status and its people are transient and insignificant.

A brief glance at the life of this great scholar reveals that he was a devoted and resilient scholar, steadfast in adversity. He travelled throughout the Islāmic lands, spreading light and knowledge wherever he went. He journeyed across Islāmic regions, and in every place he visited, students gathered to drink from his deep well of knowledge, their souls illuminated by his sincere and faithful spirit, as he imparted knowledge.

He was unwavering in his commitment to the truth, advancing boldly without concern for whether people approved or disapproved, as long as his relationship with ALLĀH was strong. This conviction seemed to flow through his veins; he had been engaged in the struggle for truth since his youth. His family background was one of piety, strength of character, patience, and endurance in the pursuit of justice. He hailed from a family

in the Caucasus, known for their resilience, physical beauty, and deep intellect.

His father moved to Istanbul, where he was born into a life of guidance and righteousness. He studied religious sciences diligently, attaining the highest degrees by the age of twenty-eight. He then progressed through the ranks of teaching, reaching the pinnacle of his profession at a young age. When faced with those who sought to separate worldly affairs from religion, allowing the world to govern without the guidance of ALLĀH's Revelations, he stood firm against them. He chose his faith over their worldly comforts, preferring to defend the remnants of Islāmic values rather than live a life of ease. He opted for a life of continuous effort that would please ALLĀH over a life of luxury that would please people and those who wield worldly power, for pleasing ALLĀH is the ultimate goal of faith.

He fought against the Unionists who sought to restrict religious studies and shorten their duration. He recognised that such restrictions would diminish the quality of education. Consequently, he devised clever strategies to counter their intentions, successfully extending the period of study they sought to shorten, thereby allowing students of Islāmic knowledge to fully absorb and understand their studies, especially for non-Arabic speakers learning in clear Arabic.

In all circumstances, he was a noble scholar who did not rely on the powerful for any ranking benefits, nor did he flatter them to achieve any goal, no matter how esteemed. He, may ALLĀH be pleased with him, believed that true greatness could only be attained through a righteous path and a straight methodology. One cannot reach a noble end except through a means that preserves one's dignity, for only a noble person can

achieve noble objectives. There is no honour in depending on the powerful of this world, as those who do so will not be esteemed by ALLĀH.

Through his diligence and hard work, he attained the position of Deputy Shaykh al-Islām in Turkey, fully aware of the responsibilities that came with the role. He never compromised the public interest for the sake of pleasing the powerful, regardless of their strength or influence. He preferred to resign from his position rather than yield to falsehood.

Although he was dismissed from the office of Deputy Shaykh al-Islām, he remained a member of its council, where he served as president. He did not see it as degrading to move from leadership to membership, as long as the reason for his demotion was noble. True dignity does not prevent one from working as a leader or a subordinate; rather, honour is derived from the truth itself, and it is blessed by ALLĀH, Exalted be He.

However, the noble and pious scholar faces the greatest trials, witnessing his beloved homeland—the great abode of Islām—plagued by atheism and dominated by those who do not respect this religion. In such a climate, holding onto one's faith becomes as difficult as grasping hot coals. He himself became a target for harm, facing the threat of imprisonment, which would separate him from knowledge and teaching.

At that moment, the Imām found himself facing three options: either remain imprisoned, allowing his knowledge to fade away in the depths of jails—an unbearable fate for a scholar accustomed to teaching, guiding, and sharing the treasures of religion with clarity—or resort to flattery and compromise, which would be as difficult as threading a needle with a rope.

The third option was to migrate to the vast lands of ALLĀH, recalling the verse: “*Was not the earth of ALLĀH spacious enough for you to emigrate therein?*” — (Qur’ān 4:79).

He migrated to Egypt, then moved to the Levant, returned to Cairo, and subsequently went back to Damascus. Ultimately, he settled permanently in Cairo. During his travels to the Levant and his stay in Cairo, he became a beacon of light. His residence, whether modest or expanded into a school, served as a refuge for genuine seekers of knowledge, not just students of formal education. Those students were guided to the springs of knowledge from the books he authored, and the market for Islāmic sciences thrived, with scholars' hearts filled with faith. He directed the minds of those seekers towards these sources, illuminating their understanding and generously sharing his vast knowledge and insights.

The author of these lines met the Shaykh only about two years before his passing. However, a spiritual connection had been established years earlier when I was reading his writings, his commentaries on manuscripts, and the books he had authored. I never imagined that I could share a bond with such a distinguished scholar until I read his book, “*The Virtuous Conduct in the Life of Imām Abū Yūsuf al-Qāḍī*.” In this work, he, may ALLĀH be pleased with him, spoke highly of me when discussing the legal methods attributed to Abū Yūsuf. I can attest that I have received praise from esteemed scholars, but none made me feel as honoured as the recognition from that great Shaykh, for it was an academic accolade from one who had the authority to grant such a distinction.

I sought to meet him, but I was unaware of his esteemed status. While walking in the area of al-‘Ataba al-Khadra, I came across a dignified and venerable Shaykh, his gray hair radiating like the light of truth. He was

dressed in the attire of the Turkish scholars, surrounded by students from Syria. It struck me that this was the Shaykh I had been looking for.

As soon as his students left, I asked one of them, “Who is this Shaykh?” He replied, “*This is Shaykh al-Kawtharī.*” I quickly approached him to introduce myself, and I found that he was just as eager to meet me as I was to meet him. After our initial encounter, I realized that he was much more than his books and research; he was a true treasure in Egypt.

At this point, I want to share a lesser-known chapter from the history of this Imām. I wanted his knowledge to be accessible to many students so they could benefit from his abundant wisdom. The Department of Sharia at the Faculty of Law at Cairo University proposed appointing the esteemed Shaykh to teach in the Sharia diploma program within the graduate studies department. The council approved this proposal after its members recognized the significant contributions the Shaykh had made to Islāmic sciences and his extensive body of work.

I went to the Shaykh with the head of the Sharia department, but we were surprised when he declined the offer due to his own illness, his wife's illness, and his declining eyesight. He firmly insisted on his refusal, and despite our repeated requests, he continued to decline. When we saw that our efforts were in vain, we hoped he might reconsider this academic collaboration that we were eagerly looking forward to. I then returned to him alone, repeating my request and urging him once more. However, this time he was very clear with me. The noble Shaykh said, “*This is indeed a place of knowledge, and I wish to teach only when I am strong enough to deliver my lessons in the way I desire. My old age, my poor health, and the health of my wife, who is my only companion in this life, all prevent me from fulfilling this duty to the standard I find acceptable.*”

As I left the Shaykh's presence, I reflected on the noble spirit that was confined within that human body; it was the spirit of al-Kawtharī.

The noble man who faced numerous hardships and triumphed over them endured the loss of loved ones, having lost his parents during his lifetime, one after another. With each loss came sorrow, and with every sorrow, there were wounds in his soul and grief in his heart. Despite all of this, he was able to endure it with patience, echoing the words of Jacob: “*Patience is beautiful, and ALLĀH is the One whose help is sought.*” — (Qur’ān 12: 81).

His partner in both joy and adversity, who shared in the trials of life after a series of calamities, attempted to be patient and find solace. He provided her with comfort and healing for her wounds, even as he himself was in need of healing. Ultimately, he departed to his Lord, enduring with gratitude and praise, just as the righteous and sincere do—may ALLĀH be pleased with him and grant him peace.

— *Muhammad Abū Zahrah*